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SUBJECT: SOLIDARITY CENTER REPRESENTATIVES DISCUSS THE CURRENT STATE OF ORGANIZED LABOR IN PAKISTAN

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a January 28 meeting with the Ambassador, Tim Ryan, the American Center of International Labor Solidarity's Asia and Europe Office Director, described the current status of the labor movement in Pakistan. Highlighting the role that organized labor can play in the development of civil society, Mr. Ryan reported on the status of Solidarity Center efforts to promote union capacity building. Center representatives singled out the Pakistani Workers Federation (PWF), the country's largest civil society organization outside of political parties, as having the potential to play an increasingly influential role on the national scene. The Solidarity Center welcomes closer coordination with the Embassy to advance labor standards in Pakistan, including through the Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZs). End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Tim Ryan, the American Center of International Labor Solidarity's Asia and Europe Office Director and Greg Schultz, the Solidarity Center's Islamabad-based country director, paid a courtesy call on the Ambassador on January 28.

¶3. (SBU) The American Center for Labor Solidarity, launched by the AFL-CIO in 1997, works globally with unions and community groups to develop independent trade organizations. While active in Pakistan since the 1980s, the Solidarity Center opened a local office in 2005 and has established a program with current funding provided by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The Center works mainly with the Ministry of Labor, the Pakistani Workers Federation (PWF), the Karachi-based NGO Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid (LHRLA) on women's labor issues, the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) on child labor issues and the Pakistan Institute for Legislative Development and Training (PILDAT).

¶4. (SBU) Solidarity Center activities in Pakistan focus on union capacity building and specifically the Pakistan Workers Federation (PWF), the country's largest labor federation. Boasting 800,000 members, the PWF constitutes the country's largest civil society organization outside of political parties. The PWF is led by General Secretary Khurshid Ahmed, who is also a member of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Governing Board. Mr. Ryan described the PWF as "politically nascent," and believes that organized labor has stayed off the radar screen in Pakistan due to its apolitical character and willingness to negotiate directly with management in lieu of nationwide strikes.

¶5. (SBU) Mr. Ryan described PWF leadership as secular, progressive and pro-American in its orientation. PWF leadership has been reluctant to enter the political fray, having never endorsed a particular political party. Mr. Schultz believes that the PWF will not make an endorsement this election season and is instead focusing on persuading political parties to adopt pro-labor policies in their

election platforms. Despite the PWF's insistence on not being "co-opted" by a particular party, Mr. Ryan emphasized the influence the union can wield due to its size. Solidarity Center representatives stressed that whatever the outcome of the February 18 parliamentary elections, organized labor has a critical role to play in the formation of a vibrant civil society in Pakistan.

¶6. (SBU) Following the outcome of elections, the Solidarity Center will work in conjunction with the PWF and PILDAT to host a series of labor discussions and programs for new parliamentarians. The Center also plans to initiate a pilot program in Sindh province to train labor court judges on international labor standards and start a Trade Union Youth Leadership Forum to identify and educate up-and-coming union leaders. Additionally, the Solidarity Center will seek greater input from union and factory management for labor policies through the Workers Employers Bilateral Council of Pakistan (WEBCOP).

¶7. (SBU) Mr. Schultz described his interaction with the Ministry of Labor as excellent, singling out the Ministry's Policy Planning Cell as particularly progressive on labor issues. However, Center representatives cited the lack of labor law enforcement as particularly troublesome. While international organizations focus primarily on child and bonded labor, these abuses are a "canary in a coal mine" to the broader problem of general working conditions in Pakistan.

¶8. (SBU) The Solidarity Center welcomes closer coordination with the Embassy to advance labor standards in Pakistan, including in the Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZs). The Center believes that core labor standards, including the right of organization, should be protected for all workers, including those in export processing zones (EPZs). The Government of Pakistan (GOP) uses the Emergency

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Service Maintenance Act (ESMA), designed to keep the nation's critical infrastructure and industries running at all times, to prohibit labor unions from forming in the industrial areas, including EPZs. Center representatives commented that while they support the USG's trade preference programs for Pakistan, labor standards and enforcement mechanisms must be strengthened in the ROZs to ensure compliance with international standards.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: While organized labor has not previously factored into the political process, labor unions, by sheer numbers alone, have the potential to influence millions of households across Pakistan. Upcoming discussions on ROZs provide the USG with the opportunity to better engage labor leaders, provincial and federal government authorities as well as industrialists to highlight improved labor standards and enforcement. End Comment.

PATTERSON